

Lessons from the land and empowering the next generation; Vitally important to teach children the quiet strength of nature

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Body

The steady cycle of planting, tending and harvesting is a powerful reminder for navigating difficult times.

Nature teaches us patience, persistence and resilience - lessons essential for today's youth as they face an increasingly complex world.

By engaging with the land, children learn to slow down, observe and appreciate the rhythms of nature, understanding that change and growth take time - and that this effort creates valuable rewards.

Intentionally fostering a connection to the natural world in children in a world that often values instant gratification is of vital importance for teaching them the quiet strength of nature, and that it deserves respect.

Summer camps and school field trips that welcome young school-age children into dynamic nature-based programs bring curriculum to life. GreenUP's educational programs often begin with a social contract that includes respect for others, respect for ourselves and respect for nature. Children then engage in hands-on exploration and learning.

GreenUP has adopted local approaches to programs as a collaborator in Pathway to Stewardship and Kinship, a community-based initiative directed by Camp Kawartha and designed to foster a deep and lasting connection between children and the natural world.

Rooted in the idea that meaningful early experiences in nature help build environmental responsibility and well-being, the project provides a framework for educators, families and community organizations to engage youth in hands-on, developmentally appropriate outdoor activities called landmarks.

Many of these landmarks, particularly in the early years, involve regular visits to favourite outdoor spaces, developing a sense of belonging, familiarity and connection to place. GreenUP is proud that for many young local residents, Ecology Park's "five-acre urban oasis" is that place, and lessons learned therein might be rooted deeply in who they have become.

A guiding principle that inspires GreenUP's nature education programs is the concept of two-eyed seeing, introduced by Mi'kmaq elders Albert and Murdena Marshall. This approach encourages viewing the world through the lens of Western knowledge and the lens of Indigenous wisdom, blending the strengths of both perspectives.

Scientific understanding of ecosystems, when combined with Indigenous teachings of interconnectedness and respect for the land, fosters a more holistic appreciation of the environment. Through this approach, young people

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can develop a deeper understanding of their place within the natural world and the responsibility they hold in protecting it.

The Peterborough Children's Water Festival, a collaborative educational event on which GreenUP is a lead organization, teaches students about this responsibility by engaging them in interactive, hands-on learning experiences that highlight the importance of water conservation, stewardship and sustainability.

Each May, more than 1,300 students gather at the festival to participate in activities focused on water quality, ecosystems and human impact - and gain a deeper understanding of how their actions can affect our local waterways.

By nurturing a connection to our local rivers, lakes and wetlands, the festival reinforces the idea everyone has a role to play in safeguarding clean and accessible water for future generations.

Prioritizing youth engagement and environmental education is an opportunity to invest in and support the next generation to become equipped to confront the climate crisis with creativity and urgency. Immersive nature-based programs ensure young people not only understand the challenges, but also develop into the leaders and advocates our planet desperately needs.

The ongoing Youth Climate Action Series for female identifying, gender diverse and two-spirit youth ages 13 to 18 prepares participants to become those environmental leaders by engaging them to identify their own interests, deepen knowledge and add new skill sets.

Through hands-on activities over five workshop sessions, the program demonstrates impactful practices and initiatives they can champion in their own schools, homes and communities.

By collecting personal experiences in nature, or even tending to a garden, it becomes clear working with the land allows one to discover deep personal roots - the ability to adapt, persevere and thrive no matter the circumstances. Now more than ever, these lessons are critical.

For today's youth, reconnecting with nature isn't just a chance to escape the noise of modern life; it's a blueprint for well-being and mental wellness.

GreenUP provides children and families experiential opportunities to connect to nature and community in meaningful ways, whether it's learning about sustainable ways of growing food, exploring local ecosystems or discovering what actions can be taken to preserve and care for our shared environment.

Lessons from the land are timeless. By continuing to hold space for young people to learn, grow and connect with nature, we plant the seeds for a future that is resilient, just and in harmony with the world around us.

For information on GreenUP's educational programs, email Melissa Morris, GreenUP education program co-ordinator at melissa.morris@greenup.on.ca or visit <https://greenup.on.ca>.

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